



PROJECT MUSE®

---

The Penitente Brotherhood: Patriarchy and  
Hispano-Catholicism in New Mexico (review)

Ramón A. Gutiérrez

The Americas, Volume 61, Number 2, October 2004, pp. 315-316 (Review)

Published by Cambridge University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tam.2004.0154>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/174549>

aid from the slaves' religious specialists. Catholic clergy, with a few notable exceptions, condemned slave beliefs as witchcraft and/or heresy.

Sweet has intelligently used the very words of Inquisitors, clergy and colonizers to remind readers that almost all slaves arriving in the New World had their own cosmologies, cultures, and specific religious practices, which were not Christian or compatible with Christianity. He successfully demonstrates the prevalence of genuinely African rites and customs in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Brazil. Sweet's broad-stroke approach to New World slavery does not, however, serve scholars any better than the mistaken idea of one homogeneous "African" culture that he is so careful to dispel here. Within Brazil itself, as elsewhere in the Americas, the pace and depth of creolization and conversion to Christianity varied across regions and over time. Sweet's evidence is insufficient for his conclusion that in all of Brazil "the impact of Christianity on Africans was no greater than the impact of African beliefs on Christians" (p. 230).

*California State University  
Sacramento, California*

KATHLEEN J. HIGGINS

*The Penitente Brotherhood: Patriarchy and Hispano-Catholicism in New Mexico.*

By Michael P. Carroll. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. Pp. viii, 260. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$45.00 cloth.

Here is the latest addition to the extensive bibliography on New Mexico's penitential brotherhood known as the Hermandad de Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno, or the Hermanos Penitentes. What characterizes this account is its searing critique of the extant literature, offering as its own modest antidote a strident positivist reading of well-worn sources, glazed with a psychoanalytic confection of its own. So viewed, the Penitente ritual is "pervaded by a great many elements that seem ideally suited to the gratification of homoerotic desire" (p. 204). This desire, Freud and the author claim, is a "defense mechanism against the unconscious feelings of oedipal rage and hostility that are activated by the Penitente emphasis on the intense suffering of their Padre Jesús" (p. 205).

To reach this conclusion the author contends that just about every previous interpreter got it wrong. The Hermanos were not born of antique Spanish confraternities. They were not a variant of Third Order Franciscanism imported during the colony's formation. Nor were they some contorted organization spawned by the lack of clerical supervision in the early 1800s. Instead, the Hermanos emerged as a religious association in northern New Mexico during the late 1700s rather spontaneously, with few if any historical antecedents, and persisted into the beginning of the twentieth century largely because of deep socio-political displacements Hispanics witnessed in these years. Initiated by the economic impact of the Bourbon Reforms, intensified by the United States military conquest of New Mexico in 1846, and exacerbated by Anglo American hegemony as the territory became a state in 1912,

these transformations provoked a crisis in patriarchal authority relations. Hispano men responded to this putative crisis with the creation of Penitente *moradas* that reaffirmed their ties of communal solidarity as men. Penitente religiosity was initially condoned and maybe even encouraged by priests such as Padre Antonio José Martínez of Taos, because the rituals emphasized social disciplining of an interiorized self that would ultimately serve the bureaucratic purposes of state.

The story told here has some compelling interpretive twists and perceptive textual readings. But its thesis teeters on a house made of cards, offering no empirical evidence that the changing system of land tenure in northern New Mexico provoked a crisis in authority relations that played itself out in such a ritualized oedipal drama. Penitente *moradas* developed in southern New Mexico where there was no competition for arable land. How does a crisis in patriarchal authority explain these? The book's other intriguing sub-theses—that Hispanos were not particularly religious before the end of the eighteenth century; that Padre Martínez was a modernizing reformer inculcating locals with ideas akin to those of the Italian Counter-Reformation—deserve deeper investigation. At the moment they remain the evocations of a learned scholar of popular European Counter-Reformation Catholicism who has a theory and travels to New Mexico intent on reading Hispanos as Italian peasants.

The human geography of nineteenth-century New Mexico does not permit such facile comparisons. In 1800 roughly one third of New Mexico's population were Genízaros, detribalized former Indian slaves congregated into autonomous villages along nomadic Indian raiding routes to serve as attack buffers for Spanish towns. Nowhere do the Genízaros appear in this account despite the flurry of *morada* construction between 1820 and 1846 that occurred in Genízaro hamlets and villages, including at the southern New Mexican Genízaro villages of Tomé and Belén. Genízaros and *vecinos* ("Spanish" landed citizens) are herein lumped together as Hispanos, thus obliterating the area's ethnic landscape and forestalling alternative hypotheses about the origins of the Hermanos that might as convincingly be found in Native American rituals. Pueblo Indian religious practice was also organized around exclusive masculine lodge houses where flagellation, bloodletting, and other theatrical rituals of purification were routine. Alternatively, the symbolism of Penitente rituals might just as easily be found in rituals of slave emancipation. In sum, this book is mainly useful for its critique of previous Penitente scholarship and as a provocation to psychoanalytic interpretation.

University of California, San Diego  
La Jolla, California

RAMÓN A. GUTIÉRREZ

*Carnival and Other Christian Festivals: Folk Theology and Folk Performance.* By Max Harris. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. Pp. xi, 282. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$60.00 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

Successfully combining ethnographic and historical research, Max Harris has produced a rich collection of essays on virgin/saints' days, Corpus Christi celebra-